The faces of death: the secularization of mourning and death in the Gilded Age

Jeffrey E. Smith

Abstract

The Rural Cemetery Movement ushered in a new way of thinking about cemeteries in American society after 1831. As these cemeteries became civic assets, they were widely visited by people and became a mediated space for articulating and expanding collective memory. The gravestones and monuments in these cemeteries erected in the second half of the nineteenth century combined increasingly secular messages and memory in a sacrosanct setting, thus blurring the lines in cemeteries between the secular and the sacred.

KEYWORDS: CEMETERY; GRAVESTONE; RURAL CEMETERY MOVEMENT; COLLECTIVE MEMORY; MONUMENTS

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Introduction

When prominent local brewer Louis Obert died in 1914, his family commissioned a huge granite grave marker to be installed at the St Marcus Cemetery in St Louis, Missouri. It stands some 12 feet tall with a life-size angel mourning at its foot; above the angel on a wide obelisk is the portrait of Obert himself in granite (see Figure 1). In fact, no one would have imagined such a marker with a person’s likeness on it a century earlier. But views about death and mourning – and the purpose of cemeteries and monumentation – had changed a great deal, reflecting social attitudes about the importance of worldly accomplishments juxtaposed with those of death. In this article, I argue that such gravestones with the embodied likenesses of the departed sought to both deny death as an end and to place a worldly face on its commemoration, elevating the importance of the worldly body onto a par with the eternal.

The emergence of the Rural Cemetery Movement in 1831 ushered in new ways of thinking about cemeteries as places that people visited for more than reasons of mourning and burials. As places people visited on a more regular basis, the gravestones and monuments within them became a community’s collective memory. This role of identifying notable people for future generations was intentional and articulated from the start. Laurel Hill Cemetery founder John Jay Smith described the rural cemetery as a place to ‘insure [sic] a double chance for good or great names being
remembered first on a stone tablet, and next on the ever more enduring page.' Similarly, William Wyatt observed in his dedication speech at Baltimore’s Green Mount Cemetery in 1839 that the cemetery was the place to see the graves of those ‘whose deeds have improved or whose fame adorned the city.’ In the second half of the nineteenth century, people increasingly used cemeteries as a tool to convey their own sense of importance in the community with larger family lots, substantial markers, more extensive epitaphs citing worldly achievements, and even images of themselves. This article will examine the emergence of people placing their own likenesses on their gravestones as a window through which to view the role of cemeteries as places that created a secular collective memory. In short, the message of the cemetery transformed from ‘remember me, and weep’ to ‘remember me, and here’s why.’

The Rural Cemetery Movement

The date of demarcation in the evolution of cemeteries in the United States is the founding of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge on the outskirts of Boston in 1831 as the first ‘rural cemetery,’ ushering in a new way of thinking about urban burial grounds. Founders of subsequent spaces – Mount Hope in Bangor in 1834, Laurel Hill in Philadelphia in 1836, and Baltimore’s Green Mount and Green-Wood in Brooklyn two years later are examples – saw a rural cemetery as part of a broader vision of what a modern, up-to-date, mid-nineteenth-century city ought to offer and look like. As the business climate became more sophisticated, views about the future of cities became more so as well. These cemeteries were park-like with nature idealized in their design, a place where people went to escape the rigors and pollution of the city, a place people sought out for respite and nature. They were consciously modeled after the new rural cemeteries back east, borrowing freely the rules, procedures, and ideas from places like Mount Auburn and Laurel Hill. These rural cemeteries constituted a new breed of burial grounds, in that they were specifically designed not only to bury the dead, but also to be used by the living, thus combining secular uses and sacred spaces. Founders of Mount Auburn Cemetery worked with the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, for example, to create a new type of institution that combined ideals about nature with uses for the living, but which also buried the dead. Ironically, these rural cemeteries were a uniquely urban phenomenon, dubbed ‘rural’ for both their pastoral settings located outside the city proper and romantic ideas about nature and the need for urban dwellers to be closer to it. Early pioneer burial grounds
were largely ad hoc affairs located on nearby farms, next to churches, or in family plots.

In the United States, different ideas coalesced to create a different paradigm about the individual and burial spaces that led to cemeteries located outside town and, eventually, the creation of gardenesque cemeteries. Part of this had to do with the intellectual climate from which these people came. New England Puritans had been working since Queen Elizabeth’s time to drum out of the Anglican Church anything that smacked too much of Catholicism; by the time they were populating the eastern coast of North America, the idea of a more direct relationship between the individual and God was firmly entrenched in the minds of not only Puritans but Protestants generally. This meant that proximity of one’s remains to the altar to hasten the rapture decreased in importance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Puritans, for example, the sacred and the secular were blurred by the idea that they were creating a new kind of society that applied Christian principles to civic society – what John Winthrop called ‘a city upon a hill’ in his 1630 sermon, ‘A Model of Christian Charity.’ As a result, the burial site and church building did not have to necessarily be adjacent, or even in proximity to one another. Once released from the notion that graveyards needed to be near churches by the early nineteenth century, Americans could not only move cemeteries outside the city, but were also free to think of those burial grounds in new ways that met the new and evolving needs of urban living, such as rural cemeteries.

These new ‘rural’ cemeteries, located outside or on the outskirts of cities, sought to create landscaped spaces with curvilinear roads and paths, vistas and views, and a highly mediated version of the natural world, which combined with gravestones and large monuments that also created a collective memory, albeit a highly mediated one. In this way, visitors to these cemeteries were crucial, and cemeteries created services and policies to both facilitate and manage visitation. They created special routes as tours (sometimes in the initial design), published guidebooks (or worked with rail companies to do so), and published stereopticon views. People used these cemeteries much like parks; indeed, while we often note that these cemeteries look like parks, it is more historically accurate to say that parks look like these cemeteries. By 1850, civic-minded leaders in most major cities had founded rural cemeteries, and in almost all cases (a handful were created by city governments) they were run by private chartered companies that had to generate their own operating revenue; consequently, they developed business practices to generate income, particularly in their beginning years while awaiting incoming burials and burial profits. In fact, there are partial antecedents. When the New Haven Burying Ground (later
the Grove Street Cemetery) was incorporated in 1797, it was the first privately operated cemetery in the United States. In a broad sense, it provided a business model for Mount Auburn, but the Rural Cemetery Movement that it ushered in involved much more than private, not-for-profit incorporation status. Unlike Grove Street, Mount Auburn realized that its ‘products’ extended beyond burial to include visitor services, landscape design, and overt promises of permanence. Today, Grove Street Cemetery is more reminiscent of older graveyards, with its crowded grounds and grid design (for more on the evolution of the Rural Cemetery Movement, see Cothran and Danylchak 2018; Smith 2017).

Founders of these new cemeteries wanted them to be places that people visited on a regular basis. The rhetoric about their grounds spoke of an emerging view about landscaping that departed from the formal ‘pleasure grounds’ and parks, featuring a more natural landscape, albeit one that was heavily mediated by the hand of designers who laid out roads and paths, cleared the land and planted trees, and ensured views of great vistas and plant specimens. Within the first decade after Mount Auburn opened and others had followed, cemeteries in major cities actively marketed themselves through publications, pamphlets, newspaper advertisements, and tours via street railways. In part, they provided a respite from crowded, polluted, smoky cities by opening up green spaces. And while founding documents and dedication speeches spoke of the sacred function of the cemetery, their emphasis on visitation and sales suggested a concern that went beyond it. Unlike earlier graveyards that were supported by religious organizations or city governments, these cemeteries were run by private companies with charters from state legislatures that had to generate their own income to support themselves. They did so by selling graves and burials, of course, but they made even more by selling large family lots, which were priced by the square foot and featured massive monuments or mausoleums that people might visit. In this way, the cemetery came to be a way for people to craft both personal and community narratives about who was important, who deserved to be part of the community’s collective memory, and who was notable.

**Cemeteries as urban necessities**

Cemeteries provided a service that people considered necessary – spiritually for churches, of course, but also as a practical necessity for the entire community. After all, everyone dies, and the bodies have to go somewhere. By the 1820s, city leaders came to see burial as a public health concern as well (Aries 1974:15). Fears that burials in proximity to wells...
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and underground water supplies combined with epidemics compelled the City of New York to ban burials in town in 1822 – the first city to do so in the United States – and St Louis followed the next year when the city council convened for the first time since being chartered as a city (Richman 1998:3–4).¹ Others used some of the same arguments about public health as one of the benefits of the new rural cemeteries. Writing under the *nom de plume* ‘Atticus,’ Laurel Hill founder John Jay Smith published a booklet, arguing that,

> it is at this day well known, and has been satisfactorily demonstrated, *that burials in cities greatly endanger the public health*; that the miasmata disengaged from burying places, may, and often have, caused frightful catastrophes, and that they not only give more virulence to prevailing maladies, but also originate contagious diseases, whose ravages have been terrible. (Atticus 1838; Smith n.d.)

Smith’s words clearly influenced the founders of other cemeteries. Atticus’ work made its way to other cities in short order. That same year, Dr Jedediah D. Commins was busy convincing people in Akron, Ohio, that it, too, needed a rural cemetery. In his petition to the Ohio legislature asking for a charter for Akron Rural Cemetery in January 1839, Commins even used Smith’s very words, right down to the italics for emphasis.²

As urban growth monetized land further and further from the central city that also included older graveyards, cemeteries moved further out as well. It is here, where several community needs coalesced, that cemeteries and burials transformed civic necessity into commercial commodity, thus creating a new type of business. The great transformation in thinking about burial spaces of the Rural Cemetery Movement centered on identifying new urban needs and defining the ‘product line’ beyond burial alone. While these new cemeteries were ostensibly designed as burial grounds, they were in fact commercialized civic spaces that funded new services by burying people. As early as 1849, landscape designer A. J. Downing proposed that well-designed cemeteries could serve the dual purpose of parks in the pages of his *Rural Essays* in 1853.³ Crowding also created a need for spaces for people to escape cities, which were crowded, smoky, polluted places. Between 1820, when New York became the first city with more than 100,000 souls, and 1850, when five more joined it, the growth of American cities skyrocketed. But the population represents only a snapshot of the number of people living in a place at a particular moment. Cemetery populations are a horse of a different color, in that they are cumulative. So, while cities grow as the number of people in the snapshot increases, cemeteries grow no matter what (see Table 1).
This emerging group of cemeteries had to be large to accommodate all those bodies over time, and large institutions required money. In this way, cemeteries were parallel to other infrastructures, then as now, in that they required a great deal of up-front cash. This was especially true because the place itself – the landscape, design, plantings, and so forth – was the ‘product’ they offered, so they had to make it attractive and desirable before anyone would purchase burial sites there. Land had to be acquired, plans created, trees and brush removed, roads laid out and constructed, desirable plantings installed, workers hired. It was this economic necessity that contributed to class differentiation which set them apart from their old city or denominational predecessors. As private institutions (and therefore businesses), they could not rely upon support from the church or diocese, so needed to generate both initial funds and operating cash on their own as well as ongoing interest. Seeing cemeteries not as sacred spaces but rather as a new form of business casts them in a new light. The appearance of cemeteries is, then, driven by the class concerns of those buried in them, so in the process of creating ways to generate revenue, those operating cemeteries devised systems that mirrored not the equality of death but the inequalities that marked lives on this earth and reinforced the social structure of the cities of the living.

Table 1: Cemetery founding and urban growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Cemetery</th>
<th>Date founded</th>
<th>City population growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rochester, NY</td>
<td>Mount Hope</td>
<td>1838</td>
<td>119%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>Green-Wood</td>
<td>1838</td>
<td>192%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore, MD</td>
<td>Green Mount</td>
<td>1839</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilmington, NC</td>
<td>Oakdale</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati, OH</td>
<td>Spring Grove</td>
<td>1845</td>
<td>149%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville, KY</td>
<td>Cave Hill</td>
<td>1848</td>
<td>103%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Louis, MO</td>
<td>Bellefontaine</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>373%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleston, SC</td>
<td>Magnolia</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo, NY</td>
<td>Forest Lawn</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>132%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond, VA</td>
<td>Hollywood</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rural cemeteries were a response to rapid population growth in cities, as this sampling suggests. The population growth figure is the percentage growth of the city in the decade when the cemetery was created.
The sacred as secular

One of the great dichotomies of the Rural Cemetery Movement was their combining of the secular and the sacred. While cemeteries were fulfilling a function that many considered sacred, they were being run by a decidedly secular business with financial priorities as well. This constituted something of a ‘revolution’ in cemeteries. Before, cemeteries were somber places – rows of stones designed to warehouse bodies, promise salvation, and be visited only when another burial was taking place. But Mount Auburn and its immediate successors such as Laurel Hill in Philadelphia and Green-Wood in Brooklyn changed all that. These new cemeteries sought to create landscaped spaces with curvilinear roads and paths, vistas and views, and a highly mediated version of the natural world combined with gravestones and large monuments that created a collective memory which would also generate enough revenue to keep them open and maintained. As the nineteenth century marched along, these cemeteries and subsequent examples became part of the secular death industry, despite the general view that they were performing a decidedly sacred function.

This dichotomy was no mystery at the time. A year before Mount Auburn opened, Zebedee Cook called for a cemetery akin to Pere la Chaise in Paris, noting that ‘a suitable regard for the memory of the dead is not inconsistent with the precepts of religion, or our duty to the living’ (quoted in Walker 1835:iii–iv). Laurel Hill Cemetery founder John Jay Smith connected cemeteries and the secular function of building a collective memory when he observed that they ‘insure the double chance for good or great names being remembered first on a stone tablet, and next on the ever more enduring page’ (Atticus 1838).

Defining ‘good or great names’ was the challenge, of course. Initially, cemeteries played a role in doing so by working to reinter the famous at their cemeteries – as a marketing tool as much as anything. Associate Justice Joseph Story noted the strength of association in his dedication speech at Mount Auburn, asking, ‘Who, that has stood by the tomb of Washington on the quiet Potomac, has not felt his heart more pure, his wishes more aspiring, his gratitude more warm, and his love of country touched by a holier flame?’ (Story 1831:13). The thinking went that people were more likely to visit these cemeteries if there were graves of notable people for them to see. A central component of promoting visitation and burial centered on the added respectability and prestige of the cemetery that came from having notable people buried there – making it a classier ‘neighborhood’ of sorts. The rhetoric of burial of the famous centered on the edifying nature of the collective. Writing a booklet in 1835 to promote
the idea of a rural cemetery in Baltimore (it became Green Mount in 1839), Samuel Walker noted that,

Maryland has not been without her great men, names that would have adorned a Roman age, in her proudest era; but under our present system [of burial], where are they? Who can point to the narrow houses, where rest their lowly heads? They are scattered to the four winds of heaven, resting here and there in obscure isolated tombs, undistinguished and almost forgotten. (Walker 1835:19)

What was needed, Walker thought, was a place to collect the graves of the famous in Baltimore. Walker was far from alone. Founders at a number of other cemeteries had the same idea, and actively sought to collect the mortal remains of notables that they could, then, actively market to gain both visitors and burials.

The first and among the most active of these was John Jay Smith, director of the Library Company of Philadelphia and a founder of Laurel Hill Cemetery. Smith understood the role of marketing a new cemetery perhaps better than anyone. He was a prolific writer of articles submitted to Philadelphia newspapers, and understood the need for attractions that would generate both traffic and news coverage. By late 1838, Smith acquired the remains of two notables (or at least he thought they were) to be reinterred at Laurel Hill, Continental Congress secretary Charles Thomson and octant inventor and mathematician Thomas Godfrey. Even after its cash-strapped earliest years, Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn pursued the remains of former New York governor and Erie Canal advocate DeWitt Clinton a quarter of a century after his death, and acquired a statue of him sculpted by Henry Kirke Brown formerly in City Hall Park. The new statue appeared in the New York Illustrated News in June of 1853 (Figure 2) and was a mainstay of subsequent tour guides (Cleaveland 1873; Richman 1998:11). And the strategy worked. Guidebooks for cities such as Philadelphia referred people to the graves of patriotic notables, and subsequent guidebooks published over the next quarter of a century included lengthy recommendations for visitors to see the graves of great men.

These famed burials helped to attract both visitors and burials by people who wanted to share a permanent address with stylish or famous people. Rising materialism in the last third of the nineteenth century compelled some people to designate themselves as ‘good or great names’ by erecting increasingly lavish grave markers and family monuments. Names combined with birth and death dates and familial relationships (Mother, Father, and so on) and perhaps scripture or other promise of salvation were no longer sufficient to cement one’s place in the community’s collective memory. The very notion of a cemetery that people visited on a regular
basis points to expanded views about collective memory. After the Civil War, this notion of collective memory became even more apparent. The *Rules and Regulations* published in 1873 by Bellefontaine Cemetery in St Louis, for example, promised a new tour route that showcased not only monumental art but also prominent figures. ‘By following this route,’ the rulebook stated, ‘attention is called to many honorable names connected with the early history of St. Louis, as well as to that of the present’ (Bellefontaine Cemetery Association 1873:19). But how was a visitor supposed to know who were the ‘honorable names’? Text, marker size, and location all gave visual clues to visitors about who was and was not prominent – or at least wanted to be. The definition of ‘honorable names’ changed during the Gilded Age as the list of admired accomplishments expanded. The transportation and industrial revolutions connected cities and markets in new ways, which created new forms of wealth that were celebrated both in life and in cemeteries. In many cases, these figures would be largely forgotten if not for their personal and, often, lavish memorials. Even today, the monuments people visit and photograph are the largest, especially those with statuary. In the Gilded Age, the line between sacred space and secular function became increasingly blurred.

**Remember me, and here’s why**

A remarkable number of these notable figures – including Louis Obert, the brewer we met at the start of this article – focused on commercial and
Many of them erected lavish homes reflecting the values of the Gilded Age and its conspicuous consumption, standing as monuments to their wealth. But the problem was that homes come and go, unlike cemeteries. This was not always the case. Cemeteries often stood on the outskirts of a town or city, but their locations became problematic when cities expanded and surrounded them, thus monetizing the land being used for burials. As graveyards were surrounded or filled up (or both), bodies were (theoretically) relocated to new graveyards further outside town, meaning that one might actually have several ‘final resting places.’ This new breed of cemetery offered permanence. The act of the Pennsylvania legislature, which created Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia in 1837, for example, referred expressly to the institution’s permanence, and Henry Pierpont noted that the proposed Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn would address the ‘the uncertainty of the permanent tenure’ of current burial grounds. In promoting a plan for Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore in 1835, Samuel Walker noted that these cemeteries ‘afford a repose for the dead,’ where ‘families might procure lots sufficiently extensive for a possession in perpetuity, and thus save the venerated bones of their relatives the insult of wanton and unfeeling disinhumation [sic]’ (Walker 1835:i–ii, 9). By the middle of the nineteenth century, the idea that a cemetery – and particularly one of a picturesque design – was a permanent site to last through the ages had become widely accepted. For those wishing to ensconce themselves or others in the long-term collective memory of a community, the cemetery was the ideal location (see, for example, Figure 3).

Examples abound. Consider Henry Chisholm, the leading steel manufacturer in Cleveland in the 1850s. He erected one of the largest mansions on Euclid Avenue (the so-called ‘millionaire’s row’) along with the likes of John D. Rockefeller. Soon after Chisholm died in May 1881, a group began to raise money for a memorial at Lake View Cemetery. When dedicated five years later, the sculpture by Charles Henry Niehaus atop a granite pedestal with three bronze panels depicting the steel-making process stood just inside the gates of Lake View – perhaps the most prominent location available (Figure 4).

Like Chisholm, James T. Hornibrook was something of a self-made man who erected a lavish mansion in Little Rock, Arkansas, with income from a highly successful drinking establishment. When he died suddenly in 1890 at age 50, his family purchased a lot in a similar location in Mount Holly Cemetery in Little Rock, right inside the entrance. Like Chisholm’s, the marker for Hornibrook offers no biographical information except for a marble likeness (Figure 5).
Figure 3: This gravestone of steamboat captain Isaiah Sellers (1803–64) in Bellefontaine Cemetery in St Louis depicts him behind the wheel of a riverboat. Without it, Sellers would most likely be a historical footnote in the city’s history as just another steamboat captain. (Image: author.)

Figure 4: Scottish-born Henry Chisholm (1822–81) was a good example of the kind of rags-to-riches story that people in the Gilded Age loved to celebrate. This larger-than-life statue includes a small model of a steel-rolling machine and three industrial panels (one pictured here), reminding visitors to Lake View Cemetery of his significance in industrial history. The inscription notes that the monument was funded by ‘employees and friends in memory of Henry Chisholm Christian Philanthropist and Everybody’s friend,’ but no reference is made to his salvation. (Images: author.)
Just about every picturesque cemetery of any size has such statuary or likenesses, most of which are in prominent positions either just inside the entrances or at intersections of roads inside the cemetery, so they are visible from a distance (see, for example, Figure 6).

The same is true of the statue of college founder John R. Buchtel in Akron’s Glendale Cemetery, educator John Bryan Bowman in Lexington, and mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch in Mount Auburn. Perhaps no other memorial speaks to profound and unapologetic ego better than that of Chris von der Ahe, a German-born saloon owner who owned the St Louis Browns baseball team in the 1880s, which later became today’s St Louis Cardinals.9 After the team won the American Association championship in 1885, ‘der Boss President’ von der Ahe had a life-size statue of himself (as opposed to a player) erected in front of Sportsman’s Park. Von der Ahe had a series of financial and personal troubles in the 1890s that ended with his losing the team in 1898 in a court case involving a mysterious fire which destroyed the park that spring. He ended up as an alcoholic tending the bar in a saloon before his death in 1913, but he still owned a lot at Bellefontaine, with the statue of himself standing on it (see Figure 7).

**Biographies for the ages**

The faces, statues, and busts tell only part of the story. Secular epitaphs rose in popularity during the Gilded Age as well, articulating social status
Figure 6: The statue of Adam Schantz (right) (1839–1903) also enjoys a prominent position just a short distance inside the gates of Woodland Cemetery in Dayton, sitting atop a huge granite pedestal looking out at visitors on the nearby road. Schantz funded the statue with his bottled Lily Water and Dayton Breweries companies. (Image: author.)

Figure 7: This statue of St Louis Browns owner Chris von der Ahe (1851–1913) originally stood outside Sportsman’s Park in St Louis, adjacent to von der Ahe’s beer garden. He moved it to his lot at Bellefontaine Cemetery to make room for fences in the outfield of the ballpark. Remarkably, the pedestal gives only names, dates, and the inscription ‘Rest In Peace,’ but the statue itself speaks volumes of von der Ahe’s own desire to claim a place in St Louis’ collective memory. (Image: author.)
from life for subsequent generations. Some offered merely occupation or a single accomplishment. Sterling Robertson Cockrill offers only ‘Lawyer and Judge. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of Arkansas, 1884–1893’ on his granite obelisk in Mount Holly Cemetery in Little Rock, for example, and William Rumbold’s obelisk in Bellefontaine Cemetery in St Louis offers only his name and ‘Architect’. But some offered both images and extensive text, in order to further confirm their place in the secular collective memory while located in the sacred space. Condensed milk inventor Gail Borden even offered business advice in the epitaph on his marble gravestone (Figure 8). The site is tall – it sits on a hillside with seven steps up to it, with its final position still further up the hill, giving it an even greater drama when seen from the road. With his statue on top, Borden identified himself as ‘Inventor and Manufacturer,’ followed by the advice, ‘I tried and failed. I tried again and again and I succeeded.’

Statuary accompanied by a lengthy epitaph of earthly accomplishments sought to cement the relationship between the secular and collective memory. Hamilton Rowan Gamble understood the politics of collective memory as well as anyone. After Union forces captured Jefferson City during the Civil War, a Constitutional Convention named him governor of the divided state. By the time he died in early 1864, the fortunes of the Civil War shaped his memorial (Figure 9). Nationally, key victories in mid-1863 had turned the course of the war in the Union’s favor, making Unionists like Gamble in St Louis more upbeat about the future of the republic. He was instrumental in keeping Missouri – or at least the critical city and harbor of St Louis – in the Union during the Civil War, which made his epitaph a statement of his political success:
Jeffrey E. Smith

Born in Winchester, Va
November 29, 1798
Removed to Mo 1818
Appointed Secretary of State in 1821
The Supreme Court of the State in 1851
Chosen a Member of the State Convention in Feb. 1861
Elected Provisional Gov. of the State July 1861
Died Sabbath Morning Jan. 31, 1864

When the granite gravestone for John Bryan Bowman was installed in Lexington (Kentucky) Cemetery, his grave marker offered seemingly every conceivable message about his earthly importance. It is a tall granite base that resembles a university building – a Greek Revival pediment atop a structure flanked by Corinthian columns that tie him to higher education. On top, a bust of Bowman resembling a lecturer looking over a lectern stands looking down on viewers, presumably in a pose of attention (Figure 10). The tablet between the columns reminds viewers of the reason such a man deserved such a monument:

Figure 9: The epitaph of the political successes of Hamilton Rowan Gamble (1798–1864) take up more than three feet of his gravestone. Besides being governor during the Civil War, Gamble wrote the dissenting opinion in the Missouri Supreme Court supporting Dred Scott’s claim.12 (Image: author.)

Nature Might Stand Up
And Say to All the World This Was a Man
John Bryan Bowman
Who in Life Revived Bacon College
Under the Name of
Kentucky University,
And in 1866

Nature Might Stand Up
And Say to All the World This Was a Man
John Bryan Bowman
Who in Life Revived Bacon College
Under the Name of
Kentucky University,
And in 1866
Multiplied Its One College,
United with That One Institution,
Transylvania University,
Which Name was Resumed in 1908,
And the
Agricultural and Mechanical College
Of Kentucky,
Which in 1908 Became the
State University, Lexington, Kentucky
And Received the Official Title of
Regent of Kentucky University,
Which Office he Filled Until 1878.
He in 1866
Purchased for the Site of
The University the Ashland and Woodland Estates,
And in 1876
Became by an Act of the Legislature
Originator of the Lexington Street Railway,
Which the
Interurban Railway Naturally Followed.
He was Indirectly the Cause
In 1869 of Hooker, now Hamilton, College,
In 1876, of the Commercial College, and
In 1877 of the College of the Bible.
Born and Died in Mercer County,
October 16, 1824, and September 23, 1891.
It is easy to assume that such markers are indicators of personal pride, and many are. Others, possibly including Bowman’s, were erected later as ways of sanctifying particular messages of memory. Explorer William Clark had been dead more than six decades when his gravesite in Bellefontaine Cemetery in St Louis was expanded as part of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 to commemorate the centennial of the purchase and Clark’s expedition to the Pacific with Meriwether Lewis. The new granite edifice includes a bust of Clark, heads of a buffalo and a bear, and quotations from Clark’s journals (Figure 11). Both Clark’s family and cemetery officials understood the importance of the cemetery memorial in conveying messages from Clark’s life on earth. Bellefontaine secretary James Gazzam wrote to Clark’s grandson John O’Fallon Clark in late 1903 along these same lines. ‘Since seeing you, and thinking over the matter of Governor Clark’s monument, I have come to the conclusion that it would better if it face the river,’ he mused,

for that is really the only vacant front now since your father’s monument [Jefferson K. Clark] faces the other road, and puts it out of the question to face this one that way. There is a sentimental reason, I know, why it should face the west, for that is the direction in which the great journey was made … Fronting it towards the river the bust will be seen squarely from the road which bounds the lot on that side. Whether therefore, the sentimental reason should govern the position of the monument, or, what I might call the practical reason, must be decided by Mrs. Clark … You understand that Mrs. Clark did not ask for my

Figure 11: The monument of explorer and territorial governor William Clark (1770–1838). Today, the bust of Clark faces east from a bluff; if you turn around from the bust, you can see the Mississippi River flowing by below. (Image: author.)
opinion but she mentions me in her letter as agreeing with the others who visited the lot on the 6th instant in advocating the western position.16

Similarly, descendants sought to inscribe the worldly feats of Elizabeth Cady Stanton on her grave in Woodlawn Cemetery. When her husband Henry died in 1887, his burial was marked at the family lot with his name and the four words ‘Philanthropist, Journalist, Lawyer, Senator.’ She died in 1902, but it was another two decades – and after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment – that her descendants ordered an addition to the Stanton family stone with her accomplishments (Figure 12):

Mother
Author Orator
Woman Suffrage Leader
Called
Woman’s Rights Convention
First in History
At
Seneca Falls, N.Y.
July 19, 1848
Demanded Votes for Women
Founder national Woman Suffrage Association
President
1869–1893

Figure 12: The biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) confirms the historical memory of her role at the Seneca Falls Convention, literally carved in stone. (Image: author.)
Conclusion

A revolution of sorts had taken place in cemeteries between the opening of Mount Auburn in 1831 and the early twentieth century, when elaborate grave markers were constructed for inventors and industrialists – the prominent locally and beyond. While some historians point to the changes in landscape design, that was only part of it. Appearances that were, to our modern eye, park-like represented a product of sorts for this new breed of cemetery that was dependent on both visitation and social status. That status was increasingly communicated through the material culture of the cemetery with a new type of commemoration that linked worldly accomplishments inextricably with the sacred space of burial. In this way, cemeteries came to build collective memory in new and expanded ways. Visitors were crucial to this process too. The statues, busts, and lengthy epitaphs only mattered if people came and saw them. In this way, visitors to these cemeteries were crucial, and cemeteries created services and policies to both facilitate and manage visitation. They created special routes as tours (sometimes in the initial design), published guidebooks (or worked with rail companies to do so), and published stereopticon views. To be part of this new collective memory, people who wished to be prominent (or their descendants) purchased large family lots and installed prominent monuments and markers, some featuring their own likeness, brief (or not-so-brief) biographies, or both. While cemeteries came to create a version of a community’s memory, it was a highly mediated one, whereby historical significance had less to do with the prominence in that memory than the desire to be remembered, and remembered for specific reasons. And the messages worked. By the early 1850s, for example, Green-Wood Cemetery attracted more than 100,000 visitors each year, and half a million annually by the start of the Civil War (Richman 1998:16). During this span of about four generations, then, the once sacrosanct burial spaces became something of a cultural Venn diagram, where the sacred and the secular overlapped, endowing the latter with the power of the former. Once angelic or religious, these cemeteries ushered in new and more lavish faces of death.

About the author

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Notes

1 At the time, there were no fewer than 22 burial grounds south of city hall in Manhattan. See the Ordinances passed by the Mayor and Board of Aldermen of the City
of St. Louis (St Louis City Council, 1824). The City Council considered this issue so important that it was the second ordinance passed, preceded only by one banning gambling and games of chance in the burgeoning economy based on riverboat traffic.

2 Petition to Ohio Legislature, January 10, 1839, Glendale Cemetery Minutes. The charter passed in March 1839. It is noteworthy, however, that Commins and others omitted Smith's arguments about locating the cemetery far outside town, and with good reason; the land purchased from Simon Perkins, Jr, is situated in a deep glen just a few hundred yards from the route of the Ohio and Erie Canal without a word about the proximity of dead bodies to water sources.

3 Downing based his views on what had become a fairly lengthy list of nondenominational cemetery associations that operated profitably, even suggesting that they could operate profitably as joint-stock companies. See Downing (1853).

4 'A Beautiful Tribute,' Paulson's American Daily Advertiser, clipping in John Jay Smith diary, August 1838, Laurel Hill Cemetery Archives (hereafter referred as Smith diary); ‘Grave of Godfrey, The Inventor of the Quadrant,’ Silliman’s Journal, clipping, Smith diary, January 1839.

5 Richman (1998) dubbed the acquisition of Clinton’s body as ‘the ultimate marketing coup.’

6 For example, see the reference to the 1866 Stranger’s Guide in Philadelphia to All Public Buildings, Places of Amusement, Commercial, Benevolent, and Religious Institutions, and Churches, Principal Hotels, &c. ... including Laurel Hill, Woodlands, Monument, Odd-Fellows’ and Glenwood Cemeteries ... (Richman 1998:216–28).

7 Graveyards were supposed to have all remains removed when one closed, completely vacating the land, but the archeological evidence suggests that this was seldom the case. People paid to have the remains of loved ones relocated, and some were. However, many (especially unmarked graves) were left behind, only to be discovered during later archeological or construction projects.

8 An Act to Incorporate the Laurel Hill Cemetery Company in Penn Township, Philadelphia County, Minutes of the Managers of Laurel Hill Cemetery Company, February 1837; Henry Pierpont, January 1839 (Henry Pierpont Papers, Green-Wood Cemetery, b1 f1).

9 In 1898, when von der Ahe lost the team, they became first the Perfectos, then the Cardinals. The Browns known to St Louis baseball historians was a separate team that joined the newly formed American League in 1900.

10 Sterling Robertson Cockrill (1847–1901) was the youngest chief justice in Arkansas history; William Rumbold (1824–67) was a noted St Louis architect, perhaps best known for designing the larger dome on the Old Courthouse in St Louis, where the Sandford v. Dred Scott case was first tried. Inscription on Sterling Robertson Cockrill gravestone, Mount Holly Cemetery; inscription on William Rumbold gravestone, Bellefontaine Cemetery, St Louis, Missouri.

11 Inscription on Gail Borden gravestone, Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York.

12 Dred Scott (1799–1858) was born enslaved. In 1846, he sued for his freedom in the Missouri courts under the ‘once free, always free’ doctrine since he had been transported to both free states and free territories by a former enslaver. The Missouri Supreme Court first heard the case, then it went through the federal courts. In 1857, the court ruled in Scott v. Sandford that enslaved people were not citizens.
and therefore could not sue in the courts. A landmark case, the Dred Scott case was a critical moment leading up to the American Civil War.

13 Inscription on Hamilton Rowan Gamble gravestone, Bellefontaine Cemetery, St Louis, Missouri.

14 Inscription on John Bryan Bowman gravestone, Lexington Cemetery, Lexington, Kentucky. Bowman was not the only university official to offer his credentials from the University of Kentucky in Lexington Cemetery, by the way. The large granite slab at the grave of Adolph Rupp sports a life-size basketball with the inscription, ‘U.K. Basketball Coach 42 Years. Olympic Coach 1948. Four N.C.A.A. Championships. National Basketball Hall of Fame.’

15 Clark’s remains were moved from the nearby O’Fallon family graveyard to Bellefontaine in the fall of 1860 along with those of three of his sons and his second wife Harriet.

16 James B. Gazzam to John O’Fallon Clark, December 17, 1903 (Bellefontaine Cemetery Letterbook, Bellefontaine Cemetery, St Louis, Missouri).

17 Inscription on Susan B. Anthony gravestone, Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York.

18 Richman suggests that cemeteries such as Green-Wood ‘rivaled Niagara Falls as the country’s great tourist attractions.’

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